

Narrator:

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Since September 2009, Michael Posner, the U.S. State Department's Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor has led the collection, assembly and distribution of human rights information on more than 190 governments. For more than 30 years, that information has been published in the State Department's annual Human Rights Report. The 2009 report was recently released on March 11th. For many years, Posner was a consumer and critic of the report — first as the executive director and then as the president of Human Rights First, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, international human rights organization based in New York and Washington.

The Department of State prepares the report using information from U.S. embassies and consulates abroad, foreign government officials, nongovernmental and international organizations, and published reports. Initial drafts of the individual country reports are prepared by U.S. diplomatic missions abroad based on information they gathered throughout the previous year.

Assistant Secretary Michael Posner:

The human rights report serves many purposes. It was originally created by Congress to inform policy, to inform aid and trade policies of the federal government, but it's become much bigger than that. It is the single most comprehensive look at human rights around the world done by anyone. In many countries where there are no Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch reports or reports by others, there's a State Department report, so it's a baseline of information about what's going on in the world every year. I spent more than a few hours looking at the reports themselves, the methodology, the findings, and the evolution of the reports and one of the things that was really striking was the extent to which the reports have become more comprehensive and better over the years. They were created by Congress in the mid-1970s. The initial report is a very thin book, and it covers only a few handfuls of countries that were getting U.S. aid. And over the course of the first 10 years even, Congress extended the mandates, that it has to include every country. Now we have a really radically different product. It's thousands of pages long and it reflects a much more sophisticated fact-gathering approach both at the embassy level and here in Washington. So it's a much – it really is a quite extraordinary document in terms of its comprehensiveness and detail.

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Although the report originally focused on countries receiving U.S. foreign aid, it has steadily grown to include more comprehensive reviews on the practices of a greater number of governments on a greater range of human rights practices. This year the report has been expanded. More information is reported on workers' rights, child soldiers, reproductive rights, practices that endanger indigenous people, and discrimination against homosexuals and victims of HIV/AIDS.

According to Posner, human rights activity is increasing within societies throughout the world, and this is a signal of great hope going forward. The increase in creativity, the willingness of people to take risks, and their determination to form organizations fighting for women's rights, children's rights, and the environment drives the State Department's commitment to addressing even more human rights issues in the future.

Assistant Secretary Michael Posner:

As the report becomes more important and more cited, members of Congress and the public interest groups are constantly saying we need to do more, we need to focus on other issues, or we need to add new categories. We try to balance those desires with a commitment to making the report readable and comprehensible. So there is a little bit of back-and-forth always about how much can we do and how much can you fit in to one report. We're looking at all of those things now, but for example Congress has mandated we focus more on prison conditions. We've always had that in the report, but we're going to in the next year take a special look at that and see if there's somewhere to break that out. There's more attention to women's issues, there's more attention to LGBT issues. There are a whole range of subjects as the world evolves and the debate about human rights evolves, inevitably these sorts of things are going to be added to the mix.

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